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古典部シリーズ

Classics Club Series

【 Short Story 】
Three Secrets, or The Meeting to Figure Out What's Holding Up the Hoshigaya Cup Preparations

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Three Secrets, or The Meeting to Figure Out What's Holding Up the Hoshigaya Cup Preparations

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Outside the window, the May sun shined as if in the height of summer. Spring this year had been a strange one, bouncing back and forth from hot to cold. Personally speaking, I don't mind the cold moments much, but the abnormally hot days are another story. The hotter it gets, the higher the risk of heat stroke after all. Kamiyama High School's customary marathon event, the so-called Hoshigaya Cup, was but a week away.

Though it pains me to admit it, while I'm aware of the trouble currently brewing in the Classics Club, there's no way I'll be able to drop by. Of course, Chitanda alone is usually enough to resolve the majority of situations that occur, and in the event the problem is an unusual one—requiring a keen, problem-solving mind—well, then Houtarou will take care of it somehow.

In terms of ability to solve problems through deduction and observation, I'm nowhere near Houtarou's match. Coming to terms with this fact was not an enjoyable process. In the past, I did my best to put that miserable middle school personality behind me—desperate to win in every situation and moving the goalposts or blaming the result on simple luck when I lost—but even then, even as I heaped praises on my friends, I still found myself with small wounds deep down in my heart. But those days are behind me now. Although I may not be Houtarou's

match, that won't stop me from doing all that I can. This is how I try to think, nowadays.

These were the thoughts that crossed my mind as I stared at the sky through the meeting room window after school. Then came a warning from the clerk.

"Fukube-san, everyone's here."

That voice brought me back to my senses. There was a total of six general student committee members, including me, gathered in the meeting room. I was tasked with chairing the meeting that was about to start. I cleared my throat, looked around at the room, and then said, "Alright, let's start the meeting. On the agenda, figuring out what's holding up the Hoshigaya Cup preparations. Thanks for coming everyone."

I received scattered bows from everyone present.

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The name Hoshigaya belonged to an alumnus of Kamiyama High School, a track and field athlete who for a time held the Japanese record for the 10k meter race. The school marathon that took place every May was named after him, but among the student body, it was simply known as the marathon event.

It didn't matter if you were a boy, a girl, a first-, second-, or third-year student; during this event, all students were to run a 20-kilometer course. The only exception to this rule were those who organized the event, the general student committee. The general committee readied all of the necessary equipment,

made sure the students all went the correct route, and took care of any runners who had health problems during the event. Although the school itself was technically the official organizer and would naturally take responsibility for any incidents, it was not really realistic for the school faculty alone to supervise the entire length of the 20-kilometer course. As such, the general student committee was essentially tasked with the dirty work. While this was an annual tradition, the circumstances surrounding the event changed every year, and the majority of the organizers were third years, thus taking their knowledge and experience working the marathon with them as they graduated. Last year, the general committee was essentially groping around in the dark as they tried to organize the event, and this year was no different.

That said, I made it a point this year to put together a Hoshigaya Cup organization manual so that this year would go more smoothly than our previous attempts. At least, that was the intention… Participating in the meeting was the "leadership"—consisting of the general committee president, the vice president (yours truly), and the note-taker—and three other members, each the captain of their respective operational teams, the route-guidance team, the equipment-procurement team, and the emergency/time-management team. The general committee was made up of one student from each of the eight classes in every year, for a total of 24 students, meaning each of the teams had 7 members.

Preparation thus far had gone smoothly, or so I'd thought until, who could have predicted it, the marathon was just around the corner without a single action plan submitted by any of the teams. We're supposed to rehearse our roles two days before the actual event, but at this rate, even getting the rehearsal off the ground was starting to sound like a tall feat. For this reason, we called an emergency meeting.

The general student committee president, Horagami-kun, started things off by explaining the current situation.

"Uh, so the reason we are gathered today, just like Fukube mentioned, is to talk about why the Hoshigaya Cup is behind schedule. We were planning on putting together the rehearsal plans from each of the teams, but we haven't gotten any of the plans yet. So, on the agenda, is figuring out what happened."

Horagami-kun was a second-year, like me. He wasn't a particularly charismatic leader, but he was mild-mannered and the kind of guy that never made any enemies. Thinking back on it, the previous general committee president, Tanabe-senpai, was the same type. I suppose people like that might be the best fit for the job.

"Right then, I'll leave the next part to you, Fukube," he continued, entrusting me with the rest of the work. I admire his ability to pass the ball to others without a moment of hesitation.

The note-taker, Shimizu-san, wrote "Pre-rehearsal Meeting" on the whiteboard. Shimizu-san was new to the general committee, despite being in his second year as well, and had

somehow settled into the note-taker role. He wasn't really the talkative type.

I glanced around at all of the people gathered in the meeting room.

The captains of the three teams were all present. All of them were in their second year of high school. Although there were still third-years in the committee, some of them had quit in order to prepare for the upcoming university exams, and in general, it was implicitly understood that the captains were chosen from the second-years in order to give them leadership experience. I thought about which order would be best to discuss the topic, but since I didn't have any information, I decided that starting with any of them would probably be fine. With this in mind, I said, "Then let's start with Hata-kun," the captain of the route-guidance team.

The route-guidance team was primarily responsible for deciding the exact course of the marathon. Although the course was the same each year, they needed to see if any part of the route would be inaccessible due to things like construction. The course was, after all, 20 kilometers long and would thus pose a hurdle for any student trying to traverse it, so they needed to assemble a sizable number of committee members who rode their bicycles to school. They would then assume positions along the course on the day of the event, ensuring that no one wandered off the course. They were also responsible for stopping the students to allow cars to pass and, in the event of

participant injury or illness, notifying the emergency/time-management team of the situation.

Hata-kun, the captain of this team, has always struck me as a bit of a dictator, and while I personally didn't really want to stick the word "captain" in front of his name, he also seemed like the kind of person that would immediately cry foul if we didn't, so he ended up with the position. He himself wanted to be in the emergency/time-management team, but considering his personality, he was put in charge of route-guidance. With a frustrated expression that seemed to imply none of this was his concern, Hata-kun said, "I haven't heard anything from equipment-procurement about how much of what is going to be ready that day, so there's no way I can write up a plan. That's all."

I have to say I appreciated the brevity of his report. I wouldn't have minded a few more details, but since he wrapped it up himself with a "That's all," we'll leave it at that. I looked at the next person.

"Next up is the equipment-procurement team. Can I have your report, Maruyama-san?"

The equipment-procurement team was, just as the name implied, responsible for procuring all of the equipment used during the Hoshigaya Cup. They needed to compile a list of everything that would be necessary for the event, from the field chalk to the gunpowder used in the pistol at the start line, and then get everything that they didn't have enough of through the

school. On the day of the event, they would serve as something like reserve members, going wherever they were needed or helping set up and take down the tents.

Maruyama-san was the captain of this team, and he was also familiar with the Hoshigaya Cup's route as he'd been on route-guidance the year before. He never seemed all too enthusiastic about his work, but, well, considering how unnatural it would be to see someone hopelessly passionate about a high school student committee, I don't hold it against him. He sat with an elbow on the table, looking somewhat drowsy, and said, "No one's told me what we need, so there's nothing I can do." Hata-kun immediately retorted, "You're the one who's supposed to make the list. Don't try to make this someone else's problem."

Unperturbed, Maruyama-san softly replied, "I'm not trying to make this someone else's problem. The fact of the matter is it is."

"Oh really? So if I'm supposed to be making the list, then what exactly is your job then?"

Maruyama waved his hand as if brushing the comment aside and said, "I'm not talking about you. It's the emergency team. I haven't gotten anything from them."

We didn't set up this meeting for everyone to get in punches at each other. I decided to just let the excuse go for now and turned my focus to the final individual in question, the emergency/time-management team.

“You heard him, Kinomata-san. What does the emergency slash time-management team have to say about this?”

The emergency/time-management team was responsible for ensuring that students returned home in one piece and keeping track of how long it took them to finish the course. Since the roads would be inundated with students if the entire school started running at the same time, each of the classes started running at different times. This team would record when each class started running as well as how long each student took to run the course. The main medical tent would be set up in the school’s yard, and the school nurse would be waiting there on standby.

Kinomata-san was a rather timid second-year whose team captain assignment came as a bit of a surprise to me. He had the habit of looking down and always spoke in a soft voice. If you actually take a moment to listen to what he says though, you would find that he actually speaks his mind, albeit in a nervous way. It’s possible he isn’t so timid as he is shy. As always, his eyes were glued to the floor.

“The reason I haven’t submitted anything is… is because I don’t know what we need. Because I haven’t gotten info on the course from route-guidance. I’m not sure what to do either.”

“Oh so it’s my fault again?” Hata-kun snapped back. This guy really isn’t captain material.

As if trying to defuse the situation, general committee president Horagami-kun muttered, “What is this, a three-way standoff?”

Each of the three teams were blaming their inaction on another team. It really did seem like things had entered a deadlock—at least it did at first glance. The real meeting begins now.

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I started things off by asking Hata-kun, “Would you mind telling the other teams why you can’t write up your action plan for the rehearsal without knowing how much equipment there’s going to be?”

I could tell from a single glance at his expression that telling him to explain himself would only be met with stubbornness, so I tried phrasing it like this instead. Thankfully, Hata-kun obliged.

“Sure. It’s not really hard to understand. Just like on the day of the event, route-guidance is going to be spread out all along the course during the rehearsal. The students who have to stand on the route near the school can just walk there, but those who are far away have to ride their bikes. Then, just like during the actual marathon, they have to cordon off forbidden areas with plastic tape and wait at places like intersections with little flags and whistles. Putting aside the tape for now, without knowing how many flags and whistles we can get, there’s no way to know how many places we can have my team stand at.”

Equipment-procurement team captain Maruyama-san shook his head as if listening to a bunch of nonsense and replied, “You don’t need a flag to stand at an intersection.”

“Route-guidance members are supposed to have a flag and whistle.”

“Yeah, but do you really need a flag for the rehearsal? Sounds to me like you’re just being stubborn.”

Sensing another bout of conflict around the corner, I said to Horagami-kun, “Do you remember what safety equipment the route-guidance team is supposed to have, president?”

Apparently taken off guard by my question, Horagami-kun floundered a bit, saying to himself, “Uh, what was it again,” buying some time before he managed to answer, “Each person on the team is supposed to have a flag, whistle, and water bottle.”

It seemed Hata-kun was under the impression that the reason all route-guidance members were supposed to have flags was because simply because that’s how it’s always been done. He was by no means wrong in thinking this, but these decisions had reasons behind them.

Depending on the location, route-guidance members have to make their presence known to oncoming traffic as well as ensure the safety of all of the students running in that area. During the middle part of the course in particular, when the road stretches in a straight line through farmland, the number of cars using the road is few and the number of cars going under the speed limit even fewer. Ideally, I would like them to have reflective vests and helmets as well, but the school wasn’t willing to provide the funds, apparently. The old red flags and

metal whistles were the bare minimum for keeping the route-guidance team safe.

Maruyama-san stubbornly looked away and said, “We have all of the stuff for route-guidance. I keep telling you the problem is with the emergency team.”

“Then just tell us about the situation with our equipment first.”

“No way. Why would I go through the trouble of splitting the list in two—sounds like a pain in the ass.”

The point of this meeting wasn’t to figure out who was in the wrong; it was to push the rehearsal along and ensure the Hoshigaya Cup went smoothly. Meetings are meant to… well, it’s probably not a good idea to make some sweeping statement about meetings, but at the very least this meeting should be a chance for everyone to meet face-to-face, hash it out a bit, and arrive at a satisfying conclusion. Rather than siding with Hata-kun or Maruyama-san, I’m sure it’s much more important to take a step back and try to see the big picture of what’s holding things up.

“Alright then!” I interjected, trying to dispel the hostile mood. “Now that we’ve gotten a grasp on what’s happening between equipment-procurement and route-guidance, let’s move on. Let’s worry about resolving this a little later—does that sound good to everyone?”

Though Hata-kun was clearly not about to accept the arrangement, Horagami quickly replied, “I agree. Besides, we’re

running out of time," forcing him to relent. You can always count on the president.

"Next, would you mind explaining your situation in a little more detail? Why hasn't procurement been able to go forward?"

Maruyama-san scratched his head a bit and replied, "I mean, there's nothing really left to explain. We put together all of the equipment for the route-guidance team, but since the emergency team hasn't told us what they need, I have no idea what I'm supposed to get for them."

Despite saying this, everything the teams needed last year was written down in the operation manual, so using it as a reference would theoretically remove the need for a request from the emergency/time-management team. I know this for a fact, since I was the one who wrote it. Let's ask him in more detail.

"The emergency/time-management team needs stopwatches, disinfectant, band-aids, etcetera, right?"

Hearing this, Maruyama-san frowned a bit and responded, "Of course we already got that stuff. I mean, it was in the manual."

He made proper use of my manual… I was on the verge of a smile hearing it. Putting that thing together was a real nightmare.

I then continued with the natural follow-up question, "Then what kinds of equipment do you need a request for?"

He glanced at me as if looking at an idiot and said, “Tents, chairs, desks, water bottles, paper cups, what else… You know, stuff like that.”

Right. So that’s what he was talking about.

Maruyama’s problems lay with the medical tents. The Hoshigaya Cup has always had its fair share of stragglers. Since there were over a thousand students total, so too were there naturally those who stumbled, twisted ankles, or fell victim to heat stroke. Last year was an especially grievous example, with five students needing to be driven back to the school by teachers and another one even requiring an ambulance. As if driven by the guilt, the school this year made it clear that we should consider setting up a remote medical tent along the route.

“We’ve decided that we are going to set one up, right?” I asked, to which Maruyama-san immediately responded.

“Not at all. Come on, I literally just said that I haven’t been able to get the equipment because nothing’s decided.”

I was shocked into silence. A single glance told me that Horagami-kun and Shimizu-san were no different. It seemed that not even the president and the note-taker were aware that the matter of the route medical tent had not yet been agreed on. Strange, for whatever reason, I thought for sure it had been.

Maruyama took out a tissue, wiped the meeting table a single time having possibly noticed some grime, and continued, “Take

this big table right there. No matter where we set up the remote medical tent, there's no way we'll be able to carry it out there. We'll need a car. But if we're allowed to set up somewhere like the civic center, for example, we'd be able to use their tables, chairs, and stuff—maybe even a tent—and that way we wouldn't need a car. This is what I'm talking about. There are way too many uncertainties—where we're setting up the tent, if we're even setting up the tent, the list goes on. So blame this on me if you want, but there's nothing I can do."

I had no choice but to agree.

The remote medical tent was handled by the emergency/time-management team. I just need to hear out each team's excuses to start.

"Then let's go back around to Kinomata-san. You mentioned that you haven't gotten any information about the route details yet. Would you mind expanding on that?"

Kinomata-san responded with a bobbing nod and said, "We decided it would be up to the route-guidance team to give us a list of places along the course that they think will be good candidates for the tent. I haven't gotten that, though, so I'm not even sure if we have a place to set it up. Uh, I don't know if I can expand it more than that."

Hata-kun could no longer bite back his tongue.

"I did give it to you! I marked the map and put it in your hands!"

I held up both hands in an attempt to quell his anger. While I can't accept the outburst, if he speaks the truth, I'll at least understand where he's coming from. I had no choice but to ask Kinomata-san, "Is that what happened?"

He tilted his head to the side and said, "Well, I did get it, but the locations were only chosen by looking at the map. I had no idea if they were really usable."

"You mean, that even if there's a space on the map, there might actually be something already in that spot?"

"That too, I guess…"

It seemed he really had a tough time expressing himself. I waited for him to speak, figuring it wasn't the topic that was difficult, but rather his personality or a problem with his way of speaking that made talking such a challenge. His gaze fell as if capitulating, and he continued.

"I didn't know if the places had something they needed."

"Something they needed?"

"A water pump."

I nearly let out a gasp. So that's what he'd been worried about.

If I had to imagine the kinds of students who would end up visiting the remote medical tent, they would be ones with injuries and those who were suffering from heat stroke. Whether you're washing off wounds or cooling someone down, you're going to need water. Water was heavy and bulky—not

only would it be difficult to carry it all the way from school, but it would be hard to figure out how much you need to bring in the first place. Having a source of water nearby was vital.

I felt myself growing a little pale. Even if there was a water source somewhere along the course, setting up a medical tent there would probably require a permit from the local water authority. This would take the matter out of our hands and put it into the school's. Even if we immediately chose a spot and started negotiating… would we make it in time?

I waved a hand to dispel my unease. I need to focus on Kinomata-san's story.

"You're right. It's crucial that we find a spot with a functional water pump. So, what did you do next?"

His response was concise.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"It's route-guidance's job to look for good places for the medical tent, so I was waiting for them to submit more candidates. It's not my team's fault if a good one hasn't been found yet."

Well, I suppose he does have a point…

Just to make sure, I asked, "You told this to the route-guidance team, right?"

"Of course."

“When was this?”

Kinomata-san tilted his head in thought, apparently calculating the number of days mentally.

“It was on Monday… so three days ago.”

Once more to make sure, I tried asking Hata-kun, “And you remember hearing this?”

He nodded reluctantly back, and said, “Yeah. I’m in the process of looking right now.”

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I looked at the whiteboard and saw that Shimizu-san had deftly summarized each team captain’s account. It appeared that the situation once thought to be a three-way deadlock in fact all stemmed from a single root problem. In characters much larger than the rest was written:

“Remote Medical Tent—Yes or No?”

Because this point hadn’t been decided on, the equipment-procurement team wasn’t sure which items to prepare, and as a result, the route-guidance team didn’t receive their required tools. Thus was the problem brought into the open. All that was left was to resolve it.

We’ll have route-guidance go out and quickly survey the course and then we’ll set up a medical tent in a location that has access to water, and should we fail to find a suitable location, we’ll simply report that to the school and await their response. We

just have to make sure this all gets done in time for the rehearsal.

But is that really all?

I don't really consider my intuition to be all that special. Unlike Chitanda, I don't possess the keen perception required to notice the slightest of incongruencies. All I have is a broad, shallow expanse of knowledge, not the ability to make use of it and arrive at unexpected truths. With that said, even I started to feel like something was off in this moment.

For example, that's right, why did this meeting even need to happen in the first place?

This newly illustrated problem wasn't a case of the truth disappearing into the depths of a tangled mess of relationships, refusing to be easily found. Route-guidance team captain Hata-kun knew about emergency/time-management's request. Equipment-procurement team captain Maruyama-san was waiting to hear if the remote medical tent was going to be set up. Each of the team captains knew about the medical tent issue, yet none of them elected to act, turning the situation into a deadlock, dragging the planning behind schedule, and no matter how much leadership urged them on, nothing seemed to improve—this was why the meeting was called.

Then why? Why did none of them move to solve the remote medical tent issue? Perhaps it was because the work was systematically split among the members, creating a sense of division and causing the captains to think each particular issue

wasn’t their responsibility to solve. Perhaps it was just the convergence of three lazy attitudes.

I personally felt the answer was neither of these. How can I put this—I had the feeling that the issue surrounding the remote medical tent came about as the result of a different scheme, and it may be impossible for us to steer the Hoshigaya Cup to success as long as that scheme remains hidden.

If it was Houtarou…

If Houtarou Oreki was in my shoes, he very well may have been able to see through what was being hidden based on a single small suspicion. The only one here is me, however. Me, Satoshi Fukube. If it were me, what would I do?

Well, it wouldn’t make much sense to ask myself what I would do, since I’m the chairperson of this meeting. I can’t exactly list all of my thoughts and suspicions to everyone here considering my role as a facilitator. What to do, what to do? All I can really do is talk with each of the captains individually after the meeting, but who knows if we’ll be able to make it in time then.

With calm demeanor, Horagami-kun said, “Alright, I got the gist. Let’s have the route-guidance team search for a suitable spot for the remote medical tent. For the time being, equipment-procurement will start making preparations with the assumption that we’ll find a good place. While it’s true those preparations will go to waste if we can’t find a suitable spot, sorry, but we don’t really have the time to worry about that. I guess that’s about it.”

The three team captains all nodded. Uh oh, the meeting's going to end soon at this rate.

Just as this worry crossed my mind, however, Horagami-kun added, "Anyone else have anything they want to add? Shimizu-san? Fukube?"

Horagami-kun's eyes stared directly into mine. I touched my face subconsciously. Maybe he noticed from my expression.

Shimizu-san, who had been silent the entire duration of the meeting, maintained his silence and shook his head. Then it was my turn.

I couldn't help but sigh. Might as well ask, then.

I would be lying if I said there weren't parts of each story that gave me pause. If I try poking and prodding at these spots, maybe luck will be on my side, and something will become evident. First, I decided to start questioning equipment-procurement team captain Maruyama-san.

"Maruyama-san, mind if I ask you something?"

His eyes shot open, seemingly thoroughly convinced the meeting was just about to end, and he said, "W-What?"

"There's just something I want to confirm. I get that you haven't started preparing the remote medical tent yet. I totally get it. Just to make sure, though, you have finished the other preparations, right?"

Frowning, he nodded, “I’m pretty sure I already said that I have.”

“You have everything that route-guidance needs, right?”

“Yeah…?”

Despite his repeated confirmations, Maruyama-san started to slightly avoid my gaze.

I finally started to understand just where my suspicions had come from. It turns out my intuition had come about from the lack of a clear connection between the fact that the remote medical tent hadn’t been decided on and the fact that he hadn’t told the route-guidance team about the current state of their equipment. Maruyama-san had insisted his reason for not notifying route-guidance about their equipment was because he didn’t want to split the list in two. Does that really make sense?

It goes without saying that splitting the list in two would take more time, and it was possible that doing so might increase the likelihood of a mistake. However—and this is just me speaking personally—it seems to me like the increased workload wasn’t nearly enough to warrant him ignoring our repeated requests.

Though still entirely in the dark about what the other party was hiding, I continued to half-guess. “Then how about this. I know Hata-kun is also pretty worried about the equipment right now, so let’s take a look at the equipment you’ve gathered.”

“Right now?”

“It won’t take too long. You don’t mind either, right Hata-kun?”

As I threw the ball in Hata-kun’s court, he seemed surprised by the sudden development but nodded and said, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Doing this will speed things up, and we won’t need you to split up the list.”

Maruyama-san was quiet.

Then, he looked at me as if launching a silent curse and sighed, “Fine by me, but there was something I forgot to mention.”

Taking care to not let my expression betray my excitement, I asked as nonchalantly as I could, “Oh yeah? What is it?”

“It’s about the whistles. We have enough, but they’re a bit different than what’s in the manual. Don’t be surprised.”

The metal whistles used by the route-guidance team have been passed down for many a year in Kamiyama High School. Count how many whistles there are and then put them in an easy-to-access place, were the words written in the manual—rather, the words I myself wrote in the manual. I don’t think there’s much wiggle-room to be had in those instructions, personally.

“What’s different?”

“The material.”

“Material?”

Did he use the philosopher’s stone to turn them into gold?

Maruyama-san roughly ran his fingers through his hair and replied, “Yeah, the material. We have the required number of plastic whistles.”

I didn’t know what to say. The ones at the school were all metal; I’m almost positive none of them were plastic. Yet according to him, we have enough. What’s going on?

It was then that Shimizu-san, who had been quiet up until this moment, suddenly asked, “Out of pocket?”

Maruyama-san nodded with slight unease. It turns out he’d bought them himself.

If quality wasn’t an issue, you could buy plastic whistles for a mere 100 yen each, but this was still highly irregular. Aside from personal items, things like backpacks, uniforms, textbooks, and so on, I’d never heard of a school who made students pay out of pocket for stuff required for curricular activities.

Why did he go out of his way to get plastic whistles? Did they sound better? Was it because they’re not as heavy? As I was preoccupied with this line of thought, Shimizu-san continued in a soft whisper, “I get it. I’d hate it too.”

That was when it hit me. I can’t believe myself sometimes. How slow can you be?

Maruyama-san didn’t buy the plastic whistles with his own money because he liked them more. He did it because he hated the metal ones.

“Right. They’ve been used for so many years…” I muttered without thinking, and Maruyama-san’s expression immediately softened.

Metal whistles wouldn’t break after one or two years of use. They probably wouldn’t break after one or two decades of use either.

I had the thought earlier that—although only speaking personally—dividing a single list in two didn’t seem that grueling a task. This kind of tolerance differs for everyone. Naturally, you’ll also have people who wouldn’t be able to stand the idea of putting their mouths on a whistle used by untold numbers of people over the years.

Sighing as if finally coming to terms with the situation, Maruyama-san said, “I really, really hated using the whistle last year. God only knows who used it before me. At the time, I made up my mind that, if I was going to do it again this year, I would refuse to use anything that wasn’t disposable.”

Thinking back, when Maruyama-san and Hata-kun were going at it and Hata-kun had said, “Without knowing how many flags and whistles we can get, there’s no way to know how many places we can have my team stand at. Route-guidance members are supposed to have a flag and whistle,” Maruyama-san replied, “You don’t need a flag to stand at an intersection,” and, “Do you really need a flag for the rehearsal?” He had neglected to mention the whistles a single time.

It was because he had been guarding the fact so carefully. Houtarou probably would have figured it out.

Horagami-kun asked, “So how much were the whistles?”

Maruyama-san immediately responded, “Ten whistles at 100 yen each, so 1,000 yen plus tax.”

“Do you have the receipt?”

“At home, I think.”

“Then give it to me. I’ll try talking to the school for you.”

It appeared Horagami-kun was going to try and get the plastic whistles recognized as necessary equipment for the Hoshigaya Cup by having the school reimburse the amount. Maruyama-san was rendered speechless, as if he couldn’t grasp the situation.

I was personally of the opinion that Horagami’s plan would work out. If instead, he had talked with the teachers about buying plastic whistles for sanitary reasons before actually making the purchase, the request would have undoubtably been rejected. Since the purchase already happened, however, nothing could be done about it—a fait accompli as it were. “Replacing the whistles per student request” sounds much better than “forcing a student to buy school equipment,” after all.

Though he seemed flustered at the moment, I wonder if Maruyama-san originally had the same idea of turning the

matter into a fait accompli? I imagine his plan was to wait until the last moment before the marathon before revealing the plastic whistles to everyone. With the event just around the corner, everyone would have no choice but to accept the change, regardless of what the manual said. Then perhaps, in order to accomplish this, maybe he had used the remote medical tent as a pretext for not submitting the equipment list, effectively buying him more time before the event. At least, this was the feeling I had.

I have no idea whether or not my guess is correct. My job is solely to ensure the smooth administration of our meetings and events, not to pry into Maruyama-san's thoughts and feelings.

Maruyama's hidden machinations had for the most part finally seen the light of day. With this, I wonder if we can finally be at ease and welcome the Hoshigaya Cup with open arms.

Or not. There were still a couple of things about route-guidance's Hata-kun and emergency/time-management's Kinomata-san that needed explaining.

Once Maruyama's secret was revealed, and especially after Horagami-kun gave it his OK, the mood around the table shifted considerably. None of us—me included—were used to making our true intentions known. Saying "I want to do this" or "I did that" would only invite waves of interrogation—such was the life of a student in school. Though the teachers themselves may not intend for it to feel that way, as students stand at attention before their seated instructors, laboriously explaining every

reason why they acted the way they did, they learn a sad, yet effective method of getting by in life—the smartest way to get through school is to never have these kinds of intentions in the first place, or to at least never let them be revealed.

In this meeting, however, Maruyama's intentions were accepted. Maybe Hata-kun and Kinomata-kun would feel more comfortable about sharing what was on their minds now. Gambling on that possibility, I barged into the conversation. First, Hata-kun.

"By the way, Hata-kun, just a small question."

"Huh? What?"

"It was three days ago right, when Kinomata-san asked you to find a place with usable water?" A foul expression appeared on his face. It seems I hit a sore spot. Pretending as if blind to the delicate nature of the human heart—if you can call it pretending—I continued my questions.

"It seems like it's taking a while. Is everything going okay?"

The route-guidance team was expected to ride a bicycle or something else along the entire length of the 20 kilometer course and search for a place with access to public water, suitable to pitch a tent. It certainly wasn't a simple task. With only a bike, it could easily take an hour and a half to two hours to travel the steep and mountainous sections of the course alone. Since they could only go after classes let out, they only had a limited amount of time before sundown as well.

Even so, their pace still felt just a bit slow. Had they found nothing suitable after searching and searching, Hata-kun would have certainly said so. Instead, when he was confronted by the fact that he hadn't submitted any location candidates, Hata-kun was silent. How should I say this, and this is just a hunch… but it sounded a bit like he hadn't been searching at all.

With a displeased expression, Hata-kun sighed, "I didn't really want to talk about this, but whatever. The second and third-years are tied up with other stuff right now, so I tasked the first-years with it, but they aren't doing anything."

"You mean they're blowing it off?"

"You could call it that, I guess. I told them to go do it after school since it's a job for general committee members, and they said they would, but they aren't. Truthfully, I'm also at a loss here." I tried to recall the first-year members on the route-guidance team. If I remember correctly, their names were Kurata-san and Matsuyama-san, both girls.

Well of course they aren't doing anything! You really expect two first-year girls to ride bicycles 20 kilometers down an empty road after class as the sun quickly sets!? The open farmland section is one thing, but honestly speaking, even I get chills at the thought of going through the dark, forested area alone. I did once take my mountain bike along that road before, and the second I saw a car coming from the opposite direction, I immediately started tensing up and worrying about what I would do if the guy driving turned out to be a psycho.

Although a bike guy myself, one who enjoys taking his mountain bike out on rides every now and then, I more or less understand where they're coming from. After telling two first-year girls to do something like that, of course there's going to be no progress.

That said, I can't exactly look him in the face right now and lambast him for the terrible way he handled this. Hata-kun has a little thing called pride as well. I'll pull him aside after the meeting and discuss it one on one. Well, even if I don't, I'm sure Horagami-kun will. In fact, I can already see the exasperated expression on his face as we speak.

There was still one thing I needed to make sure of, however.

"I forget, Hata-kun, you live close by, right?"

Hata-kun seemed taken aback by the question out of left field, but responded, "Yeah, less than five minutes away."

Much appreciated. That clears things up.

Horagami-kun spoke up, "That's all the questions, right? I guess it's about time to wrap—"

Not yet actually.

"Sorry, but there's one more thing I'd like to ask."

A sense of impatience started to envelop the room. I want to get a meeting like this over with just as much as everyone else does. You'll have to forgive me, but I absolutely need to ask this question. I said, "Kinomata-san?"

He pointed to himself and replied, “Me?”

“Yes, you. I was hoping you could tell me something. I apologize in advance if I’m misunderstanding something here, but—and tell me if I’m wrong—is there anything other than the water problem that’s worrying you about the tent?”

Kinomata-san withdrew in his chair a bit, being asked a question like this out of the blue. “What do you mean… worried?”

I have no idea either. What I did learn from this is that I apparently have a pretty defeatist image of Kinomata-san.

The route-guidance team would be responsible for submitting candidate locations for the remote medical tent—it did make a certain about of sense, and since Hata-kun himself had no problems with the arrangement, doing it this way would be fine. But for him to reject the original candidates based on the lack of water, ask for another survey, and then be content with sitting on his hands despite route-guidance making no progress seemed to me at least a little peculiar.

“You know, stuff to run the tent, like—I don’t know—what they’re going to do about lunch, if there are bathrooms nearby, stuff like that? I was just thinking that if you’re worried about anything else that’s needed for the tents, now’s the best time to talk about it.”

Kinomata-san was silent. I certainly didn’t mind talking more.

“Not to mention, this is the first year that we’re doing the remote medical tent, you know? I figured there might be something that was worrying you. You might be thinking that it’s already too late for you to bring it up, and if it is, I apologize again, but hey you never know. Since we’re all together right now, now’s the best chance. We might be able to help out, right?”

As I said this, Kinomata-san raised his head and looked me straight in the eyes. I was momentarily shocked by the intensity of his gaze. He said, “Will you really help me?”

I really wanted to tack on something like “depending on the request” or “as much as I can, at least.” At any rate, it appeared this question wasn’t mine to answer. Without missing a beat, Horagami-kun assured him, “Of course. Let’s try to tackle this together.”

The moment he heard those words, Kinomata-san looked up at the ceiling and a deep sigh escaped his lips. He looked forward and said to Horagami-kun, “I want to say it’s already too late to talk about this… but actually, we might barely have enough time.”

I knew it! I knew there was something!

Kinomata-san reverted back to his downtrodden demeanor and continued, “Several of the things that you mentioned are certainly problems, but… vice president, why don’t you try imagining what it would be like to be in charge of the remote medical tent.”

Who's the vice president, I wondered until I remembered it was me. Since he asked, I'll play along.

Somewhere along the 20-kilometer course, I get a remote medical tent set up. I pitch the tent, and in it I arrange the tables and chairs. I assume that the school was able to successfully work out a deal with whoever owns this place, giving me permission to do this. I have access to a water pump and all of my first aid supplies are stocked and ready. Now, all that's left is to wait for the runners to come. What's this I see? That runner over there doesn't seem to be in very good condition. Time for the remote medical tent to shine!

"Oh, I get it…"

It all makes sense now. As the remote medical tent in my mind quickly descended into fear and panic, I said, "If someone with a serious injury came, I wouldn't be able to take responsibility for it." A stir swept through the meeting room, and Kinomata-san nodded.

"Forget even making this about responsibility; it's just plain scary. Even if we had the school nurse helping out, the emergency/time-management team wouldn't be able to apply first aid ourselves. I mean, we can just slap a band aid on them, sure, but we'll have no way of knowing if that's enough."

If a student came by with a serious condition like heatstroke, dislocation, or even a broken bone, and the team members in that tent had no choice but to treat it themselves, then the word scary wouldn't even begin to describe it. Not to mention, I get

the feeling that doing something like that in the first place might even be against the law.

Kinomata-san continued, “The school nurse will be on standby in the main medical tent in the school’s yard, which means she won’t be at the remote medical tent. I can’t help but think this is a lot to expect out of the emergency team, but no one else seems to think so?”

I’m so sorry. I can’t speak for the others, but I had never considered how terrifying this must have been for the emergency/time-management team.

Horagami-kun said, “Let’s bring this up with the school nurse. I’ll work on setting up a policy where if any runners come with serious injuries, we’ll have them go to her instead.”

Although a sensible idea, I get the feeling there will be a lot of problems trying to put it into practice.

I replied, “But we’ll have no way of knowing if the nurse is already dealing with a serious case. If it comes to that, the only thing we can do is call an ambulance, but forcing the emergency team to make that decision by themselves is pretty cruel.”

In the world that is school, the school itself is the one that decides whether or not an ambulance is called, regardless of the student’s condition—at least, they wouldn’t be too pleased if a student called for one of their own accord. I tried proposing an alternative.

“How about we get one of the teachers to be in the remote medical tent as well, so they can make the final call. If no one’s available, then we just call it off.”

Horagami-kun nodded and said, “A fine suggestion.”

Just like that, a conclusion was reached. With an almost exhausted expression, Kinomata-san said, “So you really did care about what I had to say.”

Rather than it be about caring or not, the general student committee had the responsibility to make sure that the Hoshigaya Cup ended without incident. Yet, the very fact that Kinomata-san felt so powerless, assuming that his worries would have been ignored, highlighted a huge problem with our ability as leaders of the general committee to inspire confidence. I can’t say if it was us who fostered that powerlessness or something else—like problems with his family, class, or friends—but whatever it was, it doesn’t change the fact that this all came about from our failure as leaders.

Still…

In this moment, just as all of us were made aware of Kinomata’s aversion to running the remote medical tent, there was another thing that tugged at the corner of my mind.

Kinomata-san’s plan was probably nearly the same as Maruyama’s. They wanted to waste time while the remote medical tent was still an uncertainty, dragging out the situation until there was no longer enough time to set up the tent at all.

Forgetting that, why was it that Horagami-kun, Shimizu-san, and I—the general committee leadership—considered the remote medical tent to already be a done deal? Although, truthfully, I can't remember anything about it, part of me doubts Kinomata-san said anything that would have given us that impression. Even if someone else outright stated that the remote medical tent issue was completely resolved, I'm sure none of us would have accepted that without any questions. Was it possible that Kinomata-san had intentionally shifted our attention away from the remote medical tent during the Hoshigaya Cup preparation…?

No, I must be overthinking it. There's no way he'd be able to do that.

I think…

Probably…

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The meeting ended. The three team captains gradually filtered out of the meeting room, and the president Horagami-kun himself eventually left as well, reminding us to lock up after we were done. There were a lot of things that he would have to negotiate with the school now. Although I prayed for his success, I knew deep down that he would definitely be able to succeed.

Shimizu-san was currently wiping off the whiteboard. Although the board was difficult to see from where I was sitting, Shimizu-

san did a great job clearly highlighting all of the major points made during the meeting, so I'm sure it was very useful for the other participants. I was sitting back in my seat, waiting for him to finish up and leave the room so I could lock up after, when he suddenly said to me, "Nice job back there."

I was momentarily confused by his words.

He continued, "I thought for sure it was going to stay a three-way deadlock, but you managed to unravel it just by listening to each of their stories."

Oh, well… I guess you could see it like that if you tried. I wasn't able to figure out anything at all by myself; I just asked a couple questions is all. I wasn't really in the mood to explain all of this to him, however, and simply replied, "I just got lucky."

Having neatly cleaned off all of the marks on the whiteboard, Shimizu-san started to leave the meeting room. When he reached the door, he suddenly stopped and turned around.

"I'm curious about one thing. You asked whether or not Hata-kun lived nearby, right?"

Oh, yeah.

"What was that about?"

I smiled uncomfortably back. He really was paying close attention to the meeting. I didn't imagine someone would pick up on that.

“I just asked it on a whim, you know. It didn’t have anything to do with the Hoshigaya Cup,” I replied.

“So why did you ask it?”

I guess I have to answer…

“Hata-kun tasked the two first-year girls in route-guidance with checking the route, right? But they didn’t do it.”

Shimizu-san furled his brow and said, “How terrible was that. Even I wouldn’t have gone.”

“I would get cold feet too. So that begs the question: why didn’t Hata-kun go as well?”

Had he himself gone, he would have been able to know whether or not the two first-year girls really were surveying the course. Even if he was still ignoring their feelings, at least he would have been able to make sure the route surveying was on schedule. He didn’t do this, however.

“Hata-kun said that he lives close to the school. This means that he doesn’t commute by bike.”

That explanation was apparently enough for Shimizu-san.

“I see. So you were thinking that he doesn’t have a bicycle?”

“That, or I figured there was the possibility that he doesn’t know how to ride them in the first place.”

Shimizu-san broke out into a smile. As he opened the door and left, he said one final thing.

“You’re like a detective, Fukube.”

I was the only one left in the room. With the key in hand, I went around making sure all of the windows were shut tight. Looking at the now impeccable whiteboard, I muttered my response to the already absent Shimizu-san.

“Come on, that’s not true at all.”

The sun was setting beyond the window.

The Hoshigaya Cup is just around the corner. I imagine the three action plans for the rehearsal will arrive tomorrow. It’ll be my job to put it all together.

Editor Notes

This is a new short story in the Classics Club series published in an issue of the magazine "Yasei Jidai" (野性時代) (Novel Wild Age). Yonezawa also confirmed that another (longer) story will come in the (hopefully near) future.